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Background

Two dollars and thirty cents an hour, ninety-two dollars a week, less than \$4800 dollars a year. It doesn't buy a lot of steak, a good car, or a home of your own. Because you've got no other choice, it condemns you to hamburger, bus rides, and rents you can't afford.

\$4800 dollars a year, even in 1975, meant living thousands of dollars below the poverty line for the men and women who did our cleaning, maintenance, and grounds work at Dalhousie.

And that's the real starting point in the story which took an ugly turn two weeks ago Friday, when the Federal Anti-Inflation Board rolled back wage increases won by Dalhousie workers last winter.

On September 1, 1973, maintenance workers here, members of CUPE local 1392, signed a two-year contract with the Dalhousie administration. Described as the "worst CUPE-University contract in the country," by the time negotiations rolled around in the summer of 1975, it left Dal workers far behind similar employees elsewhere in Halifax.

The *Gazette* wrote at the time that "...Dal janitors earn \$4800 per year, almost \$4000 below the salary paid by the Halifax School Board, and that is not an isolated instance. Truck drivers for the School Board make \$4.39 per hour now and will make \$5.02 an hour in 1976. Dal truck drivers, meanwhile, make \$3.10 an hour." The workers took as their slogan, "PARITY, NOT CHARITY".

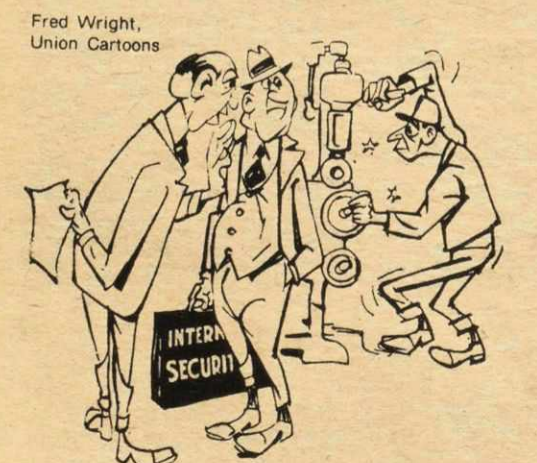
Depressed Wages

In a depressed area of the country, where too many hungry bodies are chasing too few jobs, wages are always held far below those paid elsewhere. The Maritimes has been in this state of virtual depression for decades. Despite cost-of-living figures which are among the highest in Canada, Nova Scotia working people have consistently been forced to scrape by on what trade unions call "scab wages".

The more insensitive of the region's employers make no bones about this, and Dalhousie is no exception. During the 1975 contract talks last year Prof. Chisholm, a member of the university's negotiating team, told the *Gazette* that "the Administration was not anxious to see anyone starve, nor see them work at two jobs, but...added that people could still be found to fill employee positions at the current wage level."

The Contract

By the time the two-year pact expired, on September 1, 1975 the University employees and the Administration had settled into a standoff in their talks on a new contract. Negotiations had begun in June; at their current wage rates the



"Give him our loyalty test. Ask him if he'll take a 10 per cent rate cut."

employees were anxious to have a much better contract settled as soon as possible. Throughout the summer the Administration had used management vacations and other stall tactics to stymie a quick settlement.

Negotiations broke down, and the dispute was referred to a Conciliation Board. Taking into account previously low wages, the Board recommended that the base rate of \$2.30/hour should be raised by 90c/hour, beginning on September 1, 1975, with a further raise of a 25c an hour starting March 31 of this year.

The union will not interfere with students going to classes, if there are classes.

This one-year contract, expiring August 31, 1976, was considered satisfactory by the Dal employees, and the Administration's first reaction was to go along with it as well.

But the University's Board of Governors, in a patriotic move, discovered the fortunate impediment of the Trudeau wage control legislation, and found that it could not sign the contract already agreed to in principle. At the time, the A.I.B. had no jurisdiction in Nova Scotia, for no agreement between the Federal and Provincial governments had been signed.

The union argued strongly that the new Act specifically excluded employees, like Dal's, who had been abysmally paid in the past. Ray Hill, CUPE field representative, said the university was "using the Anti-Inflation Board as a scapegoat", and said, "I think the only alternative is to strike. The men expect to get the wage they negotiated, and I'm willing to personally lead them out even if it means jail terms. I'm willing to take that."

Administration Tactics

The University immediately tried to separate itself from the decision it had just made. Its public stance was to blame the A.I.B. who had not yet heard of, let alone seen, the agreement. In a letter to CUPE local 1392 the administration claimed that, "the University should not be expected to break the law, even if the machinery to implement the law is still uncertain."

Despite Administration spokesman Andrew MacKay's smooth presentation of the University's position, maintenance workers weren't moved. Their demand remained unchanged - Dalhousie had agreed to a new contract, and now it must sign the settlement and live up to its terms. And rank and file support for this position was becoming more and more militant.

Not everyone saw through the Administration's position. The *Gazette's* January 15, 1976 editorial was headlined, "Government cause of union problem". The Student Council's stand was similar, but marked by an excessive concern not for the workers involved, but for the continued operation of its Student Union Building. In a letter to Maynard McAskill, then Provincial Minister of Consumers Affairs, the Student Union blamed "the indecision of both provincial and federal governments" for the continued impasse.

While agreeing that it would not pay 'scabs' to replace maintenance workers if a strike was forced, the Council passed a motion "which provided for exceptions in the case of maintaining health standards and emergency situations." Clearly, some were thinking of using student labour to keep the SUB open. Pressed on this point at a large student meeting on January 12, Student Union President Bruce Russell was forced to agree that the building might have to be closed.

The Dalhousie Association of Graduate Students were more on the mark, urging "the University Administration to settle the current wage dispute", without mentioning the AIB.

"Laws grind the poor, rich men rule the law"

Introduction

In the past three issues, the *Gazette* has included articles which focus on the deteriorating labour situation at Dalhousie.

A lot of words to waste on just one topic? But this isn't just any topic, or some kind of 'new cause', recently discovered. It's a growing trend at this university which already effects, and in the end could have a lasting impact on, your education (see this week's editorial).

The September 30th *Gazette* explained the growing rift between the Administration and the once-docile Dalhousie Staff Association. Their negotiations have been carried, by the University, away from the bargaining table and into intimidation. The University's tactics: An 'open letter', their use of the *University News* to pump up the Administrations's cause, direct appeals to the D.S.A. membership, and a misleading interpretation of their own contract offer. All this in aid of a

6.06% wage offer to Dalhousie's poorly paid clerks, secretaries, and technicians.

Last week's *Gazette* told readers about the Federal Anti-Inflation Board's rollback of wages paid to some 250 cleaners and groundskeepers who work for Dalhousie. On last year's contract, which expired August 31, wages have been reduced by some 10%. The consequences: below poverty-line wages for many, repayments to Dalhousie of hundreds of dollars per worker, poorer contract settlements in the years to come.

This week the *Gazette* underlines the importance of this issue with a special four-page supplement. It focuses on the Administration-Maintenance workers conflict from three angles: the history of the dispute; the rollback's effects on two cleaner's lives; and an analysis of the anti-inflation programme.

by Rick Plociennik and Jeff Clarke



Union Stands Firm

In the face of increasing pressure to wait, both from within the university and from the Federal and Provincial governments, the CUPE local brought matters to a head. In a militant decision to take strike action, 90% of the local's members voted on January 12 to walkout if the contract remained unsigned. Picket lines were to go up on January 28.

The Students Union, the Faculty Association, and the Staff Association left it up to their individual members to decide whether or not to cross picket lines. CUPE local President Bill Kelly did not ask students to stay home. The union, "will not interfere with students going to classes", he added, "If there are classes."

At the same time, concerned professors and students began to organize a support campaign. Although their activities had little influence on the outcome of the dispute, the Administration must have been aware of the growing pro-union sentiment on campus.

By this time it was crystal clear to even the most hopeful Administration strategists that their tactics had not worked. A collision course had been set, and the union was serious: The

University had to sign and live up to the contract it had agreed on, or face a strike.

In a surprise move, at the Dalhousie Faculty Association meeting on January 26, Vice-president MacKay announced that the University had agreed to put its 'x' on the pact, a walkout had been averted.

AIB Decision

There matters stood until Friday, October 2, when the A.I.B. stunned Dal workers with its roll-back decision.

The Board's decision chose to zero in on the "excessive" wage increase gained in a period of just one year. It chose to ignore the poverty wages paid before the 1975-76 contract. It chose to ignore the difference between Dalhousie wages and those paid elsewhere in Halifax for comparable work.

A decision made by men utterly oblivious to the grinding reality of being poor, it thrust many of the 250 workers back below the government's own "Poverty Line".

The AIB decision is a major setback for Dalhousie's maintenance workers, but they don't think it's the end of the line.

Local 1392 members have already begun discussing how to overcome the AIB ruling.

Interview

Fred and John are fictitious names for Two Dalhousie maintenance workers. Both would have preferred to use names but, as Fred told us, "At Dalhousie, if they don't like you very much they can get rid of you...one way or another."

Last Saturday Gazette reporters visited Fred's home in North End Halifax, and talked with Fred, his wife Susan, and John, a fellow worker at Dal. In a very informal chat we talked about what it is like to work at Dalhousie, and what impact the recent A.I.B. ruling had on their lives.

Both men have worked at Dal for more than five years, and both are married. Fred has four children; John has two with one on the way. [Editor's note]

How much do you earn at Dalhousie?

John: I take home \$240 every two weeks. That's about \$4.05 an hour--Christ knows what it's going to be after this rollback.

Fred: Right now I earn the same as John, which amounts to about \$8000 for the year ... not very much to support a wife and four kids.

Do you have any other jobs?

John: Yea, I work part time in the evenings as a cleaner. I needed the second job so I can live. I put in thirty hours a week down there and forty hours a week at Dal--a good seventy hours a week. I've been doing it for four years. It's not easy, you get use to it, but it's not easy.

Fred: Most of us are forced to take two jobs to hold up our obligations. I have to have a part-time job to pay my bills and live on. We're not making as much in the university as we should make. Dalhousie has never paid a living wage since I started there.

I leave here at 7:00 in the morning and usually don't get home 'till 11:00 at night, five days a week...not much of a family life, eh? But without that extra money I can't survive, can't pay my bills.

John: That's right. I couldn't make ends meet with one job. Since we had our raise in January, we were just getting settled. Maybe in another year or so I could have given up the part-time job. But now with the roll-back it might be another ten years before I can give it up. If I lose either of them, I'll be finished. The next step would be bankruptcy.

I don't think I could make it if I wasn't living with the wife's parents.

Why does Dalhousie pay you so poorly?

Fred: I don't know. Back in 1970 I made \$1.84 per hour and at the same time city cleaners doing the same work were making \$3.30. They say they don't have enough money to pay us a living wage, but they usually find the money to buy houses and pay administrators \$25,000 a year. We'd be better off on welfare than working for Dal.

It's not only us that's getting ripped off -- look at some of the secretaries making \$5000 a year...that's no money.

What bills do you have?

Fred: I'll tell you, they aren't luxury bills. It's finance bills that hurt the most after we buy stuff at Christmas for the kids. And if something goes wrong with the house I've got to go to the finance company to borrow some more.

On top of that I've got phone bills, light bills and heat bills...which is a big problem. It cost me \$900 to heat this place last winter. Three times we ran out of fuel and had to move in with the relatives--we didn't have the cash.

John: I owe few bills, and they're a sizeable amount. Loans on stuff you like to have, and you

like to have it now and not later. So you pay on it through your teeth. I don't own a home, probably never will. I don't think I could make it if I wasn't living with the wife's parents. I pay them part of the rent. If I had to pay my bills, pay rent, oil, electricity, and everything else that goes with living today, I couldn't do it. But where I am now, some day I've got to face the fact that I've got to get out and live on my own. It's going to be pretty tough. We're just hanging by a thread right now.

What did you think of your last contract?

Fred: We had to fight like hell for a half decent wage and since that time they've cut back the working staff by 35%. In the end what they gave us was a little more money and twice as much work. We paid a penalty for making half-decent earnings.

Susan: When they signed that contract we thought for the first time that we would get ahead. We need a new fridge...now with the rollback we'll have to go to the finance company again. Finance companies rip you off, but where else can you go for money?

John: You know, with that raise it was almost like heaven. But with this rollback, well, usually you figure getting a raise one year and another the next. You don't figure on going down the ladder again the year after.

I said that if Fred got rolled back I'd have to take Peter out of school and put him to work... he's only 15 and I hate to do it but we're going to have to.

What was your reaction to the rollback?

John: Well, I suppose you just have to take what comes. It bothers me a great deal and I think about it a lot, but what can I do.

Fred: I was dumbfounded. Trudeau claimed that poor people weren't going to get hit by the A.I.B. He lied!

Susan: If Fred is cut back \$3.50 an hour we just can't survive, not with the lights, fuel, and groceries going up...and we can't even afford a car. We wanted one badly this year, but there was no way we could make it. Not even a second hand one.

John: It makes you cut back on everything. You just do. Now if I lose 50c an hour off my pay, there's \$4 a day, \$20 a week, \$80 a month. You know, there's a lot of uncertainty about what to do. Might have to go out and get a third job. I've been thinking about it seriously--a couple of hours a week, anything I can get will help.

My wife says she'll get a job after the baby comes along, but then you have to have someone to look after the kids, and pay them. It always seems like you're paying out more than what's coming in.

Susan: Well, I said that if Fred got rolled back I'd have to take Peter out of school and put him to work...he's only 15 and I hate to do it but we're going to have to...he'll miss a whole year of school, maybe more...it isn't fair, but what can we do?

What if Dalhousie orders you to pay back, say \$400?

John: I won't be able to pay them back this week, and not the week after, either. Weekly deductions will be hard, too. I can't say anything about it if they say I got to pay them back. I'm not in a position to say no to them...I need this job, so I got to go along with what they say. \$400 doesn't sound like too much, but we just don't have that kind of money, especially to give back to Dal.

Susan: If they do that then we'll die. I'll tell you right now I wouldn't know where it would come from. They might as well tell us to starve to death

because Fred is killing himself as it is. Instead of a part-time job he'll have to get another full-time job.

John: Well, when we die the city will always bury us.

What do you think about the A.I.B.?

Susan: Trudeau is trying to break the back of unions, he's telling them that they don't have any rights now. Is that democratic? If this goes on labour is going to have to take the biggest fight that they have ever had. Not just one day, but longer...a lot longer.

Fred: Lights go up 65%, groceries are going sky-high and yet they tell us that we're only allowed 6% in the next contract. In a free country

I've been fighting ever since I was a small boy; first in the war, and now against my own government.

people are telling us what we should earn for our labour...Under the A.I.B. the rich'll get richer and the poor'll get poorer. I'm sure of that.

What do you think of Dal's reaction to the rollback?

Fred: Personally, I didn't believe Hicks when he said he was concerned about the rollback. If Dalhousie was any kind of management at all they would stick up for our rights. But based on past history we know better than that.

Susan: If anyone puts down on paper what Dalhousie is making on this rollback - they're laughing. As far as I'm concerned, the A.I.B. is doing Dal's dirty work for them. They're going to save thousands of dollars on the backs of the poor.

What does the future hold for you?

John: You get awful depressed at times. We get depressed at this, somebody else gets depressed at something else. You can't win, but we're going to try.

Fred: John's right. The future doesn't look very good now. I'll tell you, with Christmas only two months away, I'll have to go to the finance company again, and I can't afford to do that, that will put me deeper in the whole. I don't know what's going to happen.

Susan: They're telling us to do the impossible, but we can't...there's no way. What's the sense of working hard when you don't get anywhere for it? They are going to push poor people so far and then they'll have a war on their hands.

Fred: That's true -- I've been fighting ever since I was a small boy; first in the war, and now against my own government. It doesn't seem right.

I know that my children will have to continue the fight...they will have to be a strong generation...I often wonder about their future.

